

Mahatma Gandhi and Odisha

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Abstract: *Mahatma Gandhi visited Odisha eight times over a period of twenty-five years in between 1921 to 1946. His tour covered all parts of Odisha except remote southern Odisha. Each time, he addressed to all section of society including women to participate in the national movement of mother land and bring its independence through the means of Non-violence and Satyagraha. Gandhiji through his speech urged upon the people to promote Khadar, remove untouchability and give up intoxicants. Gopabandhu Das, Madhusudan Das, Khadi programme and untouchability were four of the major pillars of his visits which contributed far reaching consequences. His Harijan Padajatra was a great exercise in democratic tradition of social inclusion.*

Key words: National Movement, Untouchability, Khadi programme and Harijan Padajatra.

This article focuses to analyse the visits of Gandhiji to Odisha and its underlying importance of a democratic revolution. Gandhi had visited Odisha eight times in all totals. His eight visits were in 1921, 1925, 1927, 1928, 1934 (twice), 1938 and 1946. He came to Odisha in Summer, Monsoon and Winter and had been toured to the four geographical areas of Odisha-East, South, North, and West-covering Cuttack, Berhampur, Balasore and Sambalpur among others. Before he toured Odisha, he had come to know, listen, read, and write about it. The first thing that caught his attention about Odisha was its extreme poverty and famine. The long 25 years i.e., from 1921 to 1946, during which Gandhi visited Odisha was also the peak phase of freedom struggle. So Gandhi normally gave more focus his most popular programme like Khadi, anti-untouchability, massification and nationalist causes in Odisha by way of his attempt at a better and greater mainstreaming of Odisha. However, for him the geographical region, autonomy and people were no less important than the nation, unanimity and leaders respectively. Gandhi had deep respect for Gopabandhu and Madhubabu. On the other hand, he never undermines the common people of Odisha with whom he tried to establish direct communication and attempted to know their common problem and helped them this regard. He personally met, talked to, interacted with them, and got feedback from all sections of people. His bonding with local people and women helped him in broadening and feminizing the social base and vision of his Odisha project. He realized that, the real and deeper level of democracy is also about 'with the people'.

Gandhiji's Eight Visits in Brief (First Visit)

On 23rd March, 1921, Gandhiji came by the Puri Express train and reached Cuttack Railway Station along with his wife Kasturaba on the day of Dolapurnima. Gandhiji was first brought to the Swaraj Ashram of Cuttack. On 23rd evening, Gandhi addressed a mass meeting in the sands of

Kathajodi River where nearly fifty thousand people were present. Gandhiji in his speech said that it was the desire of all to get swaraj .So that; ever body should strive to bring unity among Hindus and Muslims. On the same day, Gandhiji also attended another meeting was held in the Binod Bihari Complex arranged by Marwari and Gujarati merchants, where Gandhi appealed them to boycott foreign clothes.

On the 24th March, Gandhiji addressed the Muslims of Cuttack at Qadam-e-Rasool . In that public gathering, he addressed both Hindu and Muslim peoples of Cuttack to bring unity among them and support the cause of Khilafat Movement. In the afternoon hour, another meeting was arranged, where Gandhi addressed to women and asked them to donate their ornaments towards the cause of freedom struggle. In all these meetings held in Cuttack, Gandhiji appealed to the people to make the Non-Cooperation Movement a success by boycotting schools, colleges, government jobs and British made goods.

On 25th March, Gandhi went from Cuttack to Bhadrak. With his wife and followers, he toured the whole Bhadrak town on his own foot. He addressed three meeting at Bhadrak.

On 26th March 1921, he visited Satyabadi Bana Vidyalaya of Gopabandhu Das and admired the method of teaching and discipline of that educational institution. He also addressed the students, teachers and the local people of Satyabadi.

On 27th March, Gandhiji visited the famine affected areas of Puri district. On the same day he addressed, a huge public meeting and women's gathering at Saradha Bali in the town of Puri. Gandhiji appealed people to collect three lakhs of rupees and enrol at least one lakh Congress members for the Tilak Saraj Fund. Gandhiji was shocked to see the use of imported clothes and fineries on Lord Jagannath and other deities of Puri. In the meeting, he advocated the use of Khadi in the temple. Gandhiji also assured to supply Khaddar for the temple deities.

On 29th March, Gandhiji left Puri town and proceeded to Berhampur with Gopabandhu Das. He addressed a mammoth public meeting and also a meeting of the members of Berhampur Municipality. He mainly emphasised on Non-Cooperation Movement and its objective. V.V.Giri, Kasi Patra, Purna Behera of Berhampur being influenced by Gandhiji's visit joined in the freedom movement. From there, he started journey for Vijayawada to attend the All India Congress Session.

The four major objectives of his first maiden Visits were- to know about the Puri famine of 1920, Seeing Gopabandhu, raising Tilak funds for freedom struggle, and persuading Odia people for greater participation in the freedom struggle.

After his return from Odisha, Gandhiji wrote two articles, 'My Orissa Tour' and 'Orissa and Andhra' which were published in the Navajibana and Young India respectively. In his writing Gandhiji bestowed lavish praise on Gopabandhu Das for his dedication and selfless work in the open air school, Seva Samaja, and Swaraj Ashram at Sakhi gopal. 'My Orissa Tour', Gandhi was very much pained to see the suffering of the people of Odisha due to natural calamities like floods and famine.

However, Gandhiji's first visit to Odisha helped profoundly in inspiring the people of Odisha, men, women, and poor.

Gandhiji's Second Visit

For the second time Gandhiji came to Odisha on 19 August 1925. This time, he was invited by Madhusudan Das to come and visit his Utkal Tannery. Gandhiji visited the tannery and bestowed all praise on this type of Swadesi Industry. On the same day, he visited Swaraj Ashram and addressed a public meeting in the Cuttack Municipal compound.

Gandhiji's Third Visit to Odisha

Gandhiji came to Odisha for the third time in 1927 to popularise Khadi programme. On 5th December 1927, he started his Odisha tour. He addressed the people in different places of Ganjam District, such as Berhampur, Chhatrapur, Badakhemundi, Bhanjanagar, Belaguntha, Purusottampur, Boirani, Polasara, Kodala, Khallikote and Shergarh. On 8th December, Gandhiji left Rambha and entered Puri district. Through Banapur, he came to Bolagarh. From 9th to 11th December, he took rest at Bolagarh. Then on 12 December, he visited Khurdha and Jatni. Then he visited Puri via Sakhigopal. From Puri, Gandhiji came to Balasore on 14th December. Then Gandhiji visited Bhadrak on 16th December and stayed at Charbatia in Bhadrak Subdivision for two days. During his stay at Bhadrak, Harekrushna Mahatab requested Gandhiji to revive the salt Manufacture in Odisha. Gandhiji came from Bhadrak to Cuttack on 20th December and stayed with Gopal Chandra Praharaj as his guest. Gandhiji addressed a meeting of the Congress workers of Cuttack. Gandhi emphasises to promote Khadar, remove untouchability, and avoid intoxicants. On 21 December, Gandhiji left for Madras.

1928: Gandhiji's one day visit to Sambalpur (Fourth Visit)

While Gandhiji was coming from Bombay to Calcutta, he got down from the train at Jharsuguda on 22nd December 1928. Then he proceeded to Sambalpur and became the guest of the veteran freedom fighter Chandra Sekhar Behera. Gandhiji was accompanied by Kasturba and Debdas Gandhi. On the same day Gandhiji addressed a huge public meeting on the bank of river Mahanadi. The women of Sambalpur also had organised another meeting where Gandhiji spoke to them. The son and daughters of Chandra Sekhar Behera donated three gold rings which were accepted by Gandhiji to be used for the spread of Khaddar. Gandhiji left Sambalpur in the evening of 22nd December. Gandhiji's one day visit to Sambalpur accelerated the Congress constructive works in western Odisha.

Gandhiji's Fifth and Sixth visit to Odisha in May- June , 1934

Gandhiji's fifth visit to Odisha which took place in 1934 was eventful in many ways. During this time, he launched the celebrated Harijan Padayatra. That Harijan Padayatra started from the Lion Gate of Lord Jagannath temple at Puri on 9th of May and came to an end on 8th June, 1934. He discontinued his foot march from 15th May to 20th May, to attend All India Congress Committee meeting at Patna.

In his sixth visit, Gandhiji started the second phase of his Padayatra on 21st May. On 21st May 1934, Gandhi started his Padayatra from Byree in Cuttack District and then visited the Gandhi Sevashram of Govinda Mishra at Champapur. In between 22 May and 2 June, Gandhiji visited so many places like Bheda, Lekhanpur, Gopinathpur, Sisua, Patapur, Nischintakoili, Kendrapara, Barimul, Indipur, Kalyanpur, Kalamatia, Kaipadar, Bari, Sahaspur, Purushottampur, Jajpur and Manjuri. In all these places Gandhiji appealed to the people to eradicate untouchability. He also explained to the Harijans about the necessity of sanitation and cleanliness of houses and roads of villages. Then

Gandhiji went to Bhadrak and stayed there from 4th May to 8th May. At Bhadrak, Gandhiji spent his time with Harijan workers and at the spinning wheel. He was highly impressed with the work of Subhadra Devi to popularise Khadi Industry.

Gandhiji's Padayatra in Odisha came to an end because of the rains. He left Bhadrak on 8th June 1934, and went to Wardha via Kharagpur. But before his departure, Gandhiji had covered almost 156 miles in coastal Odisha on foot. In the course of the Padayatra, he interacted with lakhs of people, talked to them, addressed many meetings and closely observed their condition of living. In this tour, he emphasised for the abolition of untouchability and popularization of Charakha programme. He termed this march on a foot pilgrimage, because for him, this walking emphasized the spiritual nature of the Harijan Movement. The sole purpose of this Padayatra was to educate the common people and send the message of untouchability.

Gandhiji's 7th visit to Odisha (1938) : For weeklong conference at Delanga and Puri

Gandhiji had attended weeklong the fourth annual session of the Gandhi Seva Sangha was held at Beraboi (Delanga) from 25th to 31st March, 1938. The seven day conference and exhibition at Beraboi, Delanga proved success. Mahatma Gandhi was able to mobilise the mass on creative and productive works. A sum total of thirteen resolutions were passed in that conference. Gandhi was always in favour of all temples being opened to people of all castes. When Kasturba and others visited the Jagannath temple of Puri without his knowledge during the course of the Delanga session Gandhi got furious. Gandhiji was the worshipper of the truth. He believed that truth is God. According to him one who adheres to truth can never be made subservient to any power on earth.

Gandhiji's last visit in 1946, While passing through Odisha

Gandhiji paid his last visit to Odisha in 1946, when he passed through Odisha on his journey from Calcutta to Madras. He got down at Balasore, Bhadrak, Cuttack and Berhampur Railway Stations, where public receptions were arranged for him. Nabakrushna Choudhury and Bankabihari Das accompanied him up to Berhampur. At Balasore, he laid emphasis on Harijan uplift; at Cuttack he was disturbed by the unruly behaviour of the mob that had gathered on the Platform to see him. Noisy and chaotic gatherings at Cuttack had irritated Gandhi. This Visit gave him an opportunity to study crowd behaviour. At the Berhampur Railway Station, he was received by Biswanath Das and Harekrushna Mahtab and addressed to the local people. In that meeting, he mentioned that 'Through unruliness we cannot achieve Swaraj. You should take to Khadi work and removal of untouchability earnestly. I hope Orissa will show the lead in these matters'.

Impact of Gandhiji's visit

Gandhiji was overwhelmed by Gopabandhu's voluntary poverty and selfless service that he went to the extent of saying that given hundreds of Gopabandhus, he would attain Swaraj in one year. From Madhubabu, he learnt the art and craft of Non-Cooperation and self-reliance. Odisha was close to his heart. Odisha's memory always hunted him- particularly its poverty, Famine, and Skeletons. He wanted people to get rid of drinking wine, gambling, idealness and fear.

During Gandhiji's Odisha visit public spheres like riverbed, park, factory compound, premises of religious institution, Swaraj Ashram, Dalit basti, Townhall, railway station, mango grove and field were positively democratized and politicized. So also auspicious utterances like Haribol, Hulahuli, Jai and Jindabad. He preferred local produce as his daily local diet.

Poor people were coming to Gandhiji's public meeting in large numbers to have a Darshan of him, not just to listen to him. He was saying untouchability is without scriptural sanction and it is access of all which turns stones into deities. His visit encouraged many to join the freedom struggle and engage in constructive work. His visit had the magical impact of transforming idols of straw and clay into living human beings of idea, vision, feeling and action.

Gandhiji's experience of weaving and spinning in Odisha and his acquaintance with Utkal Tannery, Khadi culture might have sharpened his vision and experiment of craft centered education, popularly known as Basic Education. Gandhiji during his Odisha visit disappointed to see poverty. Gandhiji also mentioned in his experience, the poor villagers of Odisha have fallen victim to idleness. Gandhiji firmly believed and practiced the value 'eating without doing any work is as good as stealing'. This clearly shows that Gandhiji was a true Karmayogi.

The speech given by Gandhiji at the village industry exhibition organised at Gandhi Seva Sangha Conference (Berboi) from 25th to 31st March, 1938 clearly visualises the picture of Odisha and his Impression towards people of Odisha.

“Most of us perhaps do not even know where Orissa is. Orissa is a part of one of the poorest regions of India. We do not hear much about suffering there because the people are backward in every way Orissa. In spite of its enjoying the honor of having one of the great place of pilgrimage, Viz Jagannath Puri, appears to be a God for shaken country. For even whilst India is a pulsating with a consciousness of national life, we know little of Orissa. For most of us, it is a mere geographical expression. Not being a centre of modern education, it has not produced the modern types of workers and therefore, nobody knows whether the people of Orissa are happy or unhappy”. This was the impression of the Mahatma Gandhi, before he had visited Orissa in 1920. After his visits to this land “epitome of India's poverty” and after having acquired a fairly good knowledge about its people and problems, Gandhiji had this to say on Orissa in 1938. “The people of Orissa have the doubtful reputation of being Opium addicts, even learned men not being free from vice, as I found ten years ago. They are also indolent and lethargic. I know, you will not mind my using this language, for you know the spirit in which it is being used. You know what great love I have for you. The People of Orissa are responsible for its poverty, because of its opium, indolence, and bigotry. The exhibition gives me the hope that Orissa can rid itself of all these evils and be once again a land of happiness and plenty.”

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